

Mrs. Anthony Becomes Military Mother

BY MARGARET BUSBEE SHIPP

Illustrated by Arthur Little

"THERE'S more to this war than Chris," said Mr. Anthony oracularly. "Not that anybody has a finer boy than ours, but you really ought to look at it from a less personal point of view."

"Christopher wouldn't be in it now if you had been firmer," sighed Mrs. Anthony. "Just twenty-one, and a senior at college, and snatched away into a training camp—"

"He wasn't exactly snatched," argued Mr. Anthony, for he was immensely proud of his only son. "I think for a boy who was twenty-five pounds overweight to diet and exercise as Chris did until he came within the requirements shows pretty steady determination. By the way, I met Betty Ellis on the street this morning, and she said her brother had written that Tubby was such a Slim Jim none of us would recognize him."

The color rose in Mrs. Anthony's placid face. She had long since passed the place where the most loyal friend could call her plump; she was solidly, stolidly, comfortably fat. She was sensitive about Christopher's tendency toward flesh because it was an inheritance from her side of the family. She showed her annoyance by objecting:



"I'M ENGAGED"

"I wish you wouldn't use that disgusting nickname for your son, Henry."

"I didn't. I was quoting Betty."

"It's odd for her to speak of Christopher so familiarly, for he has never exchanged a dozen words with her in his life."

"Or any other girl," remarked Mr. Anthony gloomily. "It's a mistake to encourage it in him, mother, though you're so proud of it."

"He inherits his indifference from my side of the family," Mrs. Anthony returned contentedly.

"Brother Charles was thirty-one and eight months old when he married, and brother Mike was thirty-two and three weeks. You can hardly expect Christopher to notice girls for many a year yet. That's what I say about this war—they make a fixed age-limit without regard to the individual case. Christopher is really more undeveloped than plenty of boys who haven't had such a care-free, sheltered life, yet the government feels privileged to snatch that inexperienced boy and thrust him into the trenches, or"—Mrs. Anthony quivered at the thought of the most dreaded terror of all—"or to send him sailing up in an airplane! They think a mother has no rights over the child she brought through whoop-

ing-cough when he was only eleven months old, and—”

Mr. Anthony surreptitiously read his evening paper. From that point on he knew the bill of indictment by heart.

“Cheer up, Milly,” he comforted, when he caught an interrogative note in the plaintive monologue. “The boy will be home next week, and maybe you’ll see things differently.”

II

THE most “different” thing proved to be Christopher himself. His mother was as amazed as if a changeling had taken his place. The son “she hadn’t raised to be a soldier” had been a lubberly fellow, somewhat inert physically, who slouched when he walked and was so indifferent to his personal appearance that he generally needed a hair-cut and a shave. He was trusting, sweet-tempered, with sound, clean principles, but he gormandized on sweets until his face was invariably covered with pimples. His eyes were blue and singularly candid, and he presented the appearance of an overgrown baby with prickly heat.

A tall, lean youngster in khaki, his hair cut very short, his skin tanned and clear, his eyes brightly blue and eager, holding himself with almost painful erectness—this was Second Lieutenant Christopher Anthony.

“They’ve starved you, precious!” was Mrs. Anthony’s first exclamation, with a mother’s resentment of any change in the well-beloved in which she has had no part.

It was only after she had been talking with him for an hour—drinking in every word, and wishing for the sake of the country that the President might talk matters over with Chris, as he had such a wonderful grasp on the whole situation—that it dawned upon her that her son had grown very handsome. He had always been the dearest child in the world, she told herself, but now—why, he looked like her brother Mike, the one woman had run after until it was enough to turn a man’s head! The recollection suggested the question:

“You didn’t meet any girls at Oglethorpe, son?”

Under the tanned skin the blood mounted suddenly. Their relations had always been intimate and confidential.

“I was coming to that in a minute,

mother. I’m engaged,” he announced beamingly.

“Get me a glass of water,” gasped Mrs. Anthony, “and a palm-leaf fan!”

When she had recovered sufficient poise to speak, she asked:

“Who? I mean, who is the girl you are engaged to? Where did you meet her?”

“Her name is Gwendolen Judkins. She’s a peach, mother!” Chris looked ecstatic. “Her hair is the color of new money.”

“Green hair?” moaned the poor bewildered lady.

Chris laughed his dear, remembered boyish laugh. At least that was left.

“I mean a new copper cent, mother; but her eyes are green. Gwennie says they are malachite. She knows a poet, and he called them that—means a classy sort of green, you know. She dances like a fairy. She taught me to dance, so you know she could train an elephant. Her brother was at camp, and Juddie introduced us two weeks ago. It was a case of love at first sight, and we got engaged the night before I left Oglethorpe. You’ll be keen about Gwennie, mother! What do you think about our getting married before I go to war? Of course, I don’t mean to sponge on dad. A second lieutenant’s pay is enough for two.”

“Dinner’s ready,” stammered the agitated mother, parrying for time.

Her son forgot the fair sex in his zest for home food; but at dessert he took one scant saucer of his favorite peach ice-cream and declined the chocolate cake made in his honor.

“Nix on the sweets!” he said lightly. “I’ve cut ’em all out, so don’t bother to make desserts for me, mother. Makes a man soft, you know.”

Even his father caught his breath at that.

“Since ‘Tubby’ has gone to the scrap-heap, what are you called now, son?”

“A girl nicknamed me ‘Tony’—from Anthony, you see—and all the bunch picked it up. Her name is Gwennie.” He winked boldly at his mother. “Maybe you’ll meet her some day, dad.”

In their room that night Mrs. Anthony confided the whole grave situation to her husband. She cried a little about it.

“How can we deny him *anything* when he is going to war—even a wife? But how can we let him marry a girl he barely knows? She may be fast, and I know she has peroxid hair!”

"It 'll blow over," consoled her husband. "Why, when I was that boy's age, I thought myself in love with every skirt that came down the highroad."

"It's useless for you to slander yourself, Henry, to shield Christopher. You told me positively that I was the only girl you had ever loved, and it's too late to try to deceive me now."

III

DAILY letters from Gwennie disturbed Mrs. Anthony's soul. They were written

on rose-colored stationery and perfumed with orange-blossoms. The first three days at home Chris, who hated to write with a healthy hatred, spent the greater part of his mornings at the desk. In the afternoons he went out to the Country Club and played tennis with Betty Ellis.

The fourth day his epistolary fever registered its highest temperature—letter, long-distance call, telegram. The telephone-call had been to explain that there wouldn't be any letters for a week, as he was going off on a camping-trip and would



"WHEN SHE CAUGHT A FISH-HOOK IN HER FINGER, SHE LET ME CUT IT OUT WITHOUT MAKING A SINGLE SQUEAL"

be away from a post-office. The telegram was to explain further, because Gwennie had slammed down the receiver on being told of his plans.

He came back brimming over with details of jolly times, but especially of the doings of Betty. He had never realized before what a corking girl she was, he told his mother.

"Betty is a year younger than I am, but she has always gone with an older set, and she used to snub me to death if I came within a yard of her," he continued. "I was such an awkward lout, and she is as athletic as a boy—rides, swims, fishes, shoots, anything that's doing. She's a dead-game sport, mother; I never saw a girl with such nerve. When she caught a fish-hook in her finger, she let me cut it out without making a single squeal, though she got as white as paper. She's the real type for an army officer's wife." He sighed heavily and dragged out the question: "Any letters for me?"

"Only one. It came a day or two after you went away."

She handed him the rose-colored envelope. It did not smell of orange-blossoms, because Mrs. Anthony had sunned it. Tony tore it open with queer reluctance, read a line or two, and then waved it frantically over his head.

"Free!" he exclaimed. "*Free!*" With a swift realization that he was not being courteous to the copper-haired Miss Judkins, he continued, in a voice which he struggled hard to keep from being exuberant: "Mother, Gwen Judkins has broken our engagement. What do you know about that? The fickle little *femme*! Charlie Haskins has been up there to see her while I was on the camping-trip, and he has persuaded her to marry him next week. He got a captaincy, and I suppose his rank dazzled her. Well, didn't she turn me down cold?"

He picked up his cap, whistling jauntily.

"Where are you going, son?" his mother asked. "You haven't been in the house half an hour."

"Oh, I thought I'd just drop by Betty's and see how she's getting on after the trip. If I don't come back for supper, mother, you'll know I stayed there."

"I don't know how deeply the poor boy may have been wounded by that abominable little flirt," Mrs. Anthony said to her husband when he came in. She did not

want Gwendolen to marry her son, yet she thought it impertinent of her to jilt him. "But evidently he is consoling himself with Betty Ellis. Such a romp, such a tomboy! I suppose Mrs. Ellis is the worst housekeeper in town, unless it's her married daughter. I hate for Christopher to be thrown with them so intimately; yet when I suggested his calling on Lucy Grayson he said he 'couldn't play parlor snake to a lemon-pie.'"

"He certainly is thrown intimately!" chuckled her husband. "I saw the young folks riding in the Ellises' car. Chris was on the back seat with three girls, all of them pretty, and you could see his grin clear across the street. You see, mother, he has always been shy with girls, and they thought him homely and unattractive; so now that he has suddenly started going with them, and they are making a fuss over him as a young officer, he's like a kid turned loose in a candy-shop. Don't you bother—it will all come out right."

IV

MRS. ANTHONY felt less certain of this than ever when she went to the military ball the following night; for Tony Anthony, with his fair hair, bronzed skin, tall, well-knit body, and eyes as blue and clear as June skies, was the handsomest man in the room. Everybody praised him to the Anthonys. Tony himself was unaware of the comment, but felt the exhilaration of friendly, approving glances everywhere, and he was in the seventh heaven. The first part of the evening he was furiously "rushing" Betty and her house guests, but later in the evening Mrs. Anthony noticed that he was absorbed in a stranger.

"Who is that snake-charmer the boy is with now?" queried her husband in some amusement. "She looks as if she had escaped from dear old India. I hope she won't kiss the kid—she might poison him with lip-salve."

"Don't be coarse, dear," reproved his wife, but she, too, was staring with manifest disapproval at the graceful, lissom figure of a woman with midnight hair, ivory skin, and too vivid lips.

Her intimate friend, Mrs. Reed, enlightened her.

"Why, Milly, that's Alys Despard. She motored up with the Kincaids for this dance. She's just back from Reno, where she divorced her second husband, and he's



"CHRIS WAS ON THE BACK SEAT WITH THREE GIRLS, ALL OF THEM PRETTY"

the one on whose account her first husband divorced her. I know all about her, because her mother was from my town, and I remember when this girl was born, thirty-four years ago—though I must say she doesn't look it. I wonder why women like that always keep so young! She's a regular man-eater, Milly. Don't let her get her claws on Chris. She probably knows that his father has a mint of money, and she'd marry that boy in a minute if she could. She didn't get any alimony with this last divorce, you see."

"Merciful Heavens!" groaned Mrs. Anthony. "I realize more and more every day how many unnecessary women there are in this world."

After the dance was over, it seemed an interminable time to his mother before she heard Christopher's buoyant tread on the stairs.

"My, what a sport you're getting to be, Mrs. Anthony!" he greeted her gaily. "You used to nod at nine o'clock, and now you sit up for a little chat at three

o'clock in the morning!" He bent over her and kissed her. "Say, mother, did you notice Mrs. Despard?"

Relief immeasurable swept over her like a wave. Her boy still wanted to confide in her.

"Indeed I did. I noticed that her lips were painted."

"Oh, that's rather *chic* nowadays," her son patronized.

"She's thirty-four years old," said Mrs. Anthony solemnly. "Mrs. Reed knows her."

"The old cat!" flamed Tony.

"Remember you are speaking of your godmother, dear."

"I beg pardon, mother, but Alys—Mrs. Despard, I mean—told me that all the women are down on her, and that lie of Mrs. Reed's seems to prove it. As a matter of fact, Alys—Mrs. Despard—isn't quite twenty-five. She let it out accidentally, and then she tried to cover it up, because she was afraid that I might think she thought me too young. The funny part was that

she mistook me for thirty. She said I was the oldest man for my age she had ever met in her life. Mother, she's had a terrible life! She told me all about it during the long intermission. The first man she married snatched her from the nursery, almost. He was three times her age, and when she realized that she didn't love him, though it was all to her worldly advantage to stay with him, she insisted upon a divorce. The second fellow proved to be a perfect brute. She is terribly cynical now, and doesn't believe she will ever find a man whom she could trust. She said to-night that she was 'a little burnt child who dreaded the fire and yet who knew that the flame of love was the only warmth worth while in life.' Sort of pitiful, wasn't it? Makes a man feel as if he would like to smooth things out for her, and show her that all men aren't so rotten as she's been made to believe."

"Son, you—you don't feel to her as you did to Gwendolen?"

Mrs. Anthony tried to put her question indirectly. Tony thought a minute.

"No. A man's first love is different. I don't suppose I'll ever feel to anybody just as I did to Gwennie—the little scamp! There was something about it so—so bewildering."

Across the years Mrs. Anthony remembered the first boy who had ever kissed her. She was just sixteen, and they were walking through the woods in May. His brown hair curled low on his forehead, and his voice sounded like running water. Just then her husband entered the room, and, a little ashamed of her inmost thoughts, she loyally decided that a slightly bald head was more intellectual-looking than brown curls.

"You young people going to talk all night?" Mr. Anthony inquired benevolently.

"Henry," cried his wife in desperation, "you tell Christopher what you think of that Mrs. Despard!"

Mr. Anthony saw at a glance that his son looked defensive and almost sulky at this. His manner was all intimacy and comradeship as he said:

"That stunning woman in black? Reed knew her before she went to Reno the first time, and he says she doesn't look an hour older. She's close to being a beauty, if you ask me, and I'll bet a hat she's fascinating as well; but to tell you just exactly how much Chris and I would give

for that type of huntress would make us use a word we don't care to say in your presence, mother!"

Christopher's sudden grin transformed his face. It was the first time his father and himself had been linked even in imagination in a common "damn," and it gave him a new sense of comradeship.

"Got a cigarette about you, dad?" he asked.

Five minutes before he would not have asked it. His father tossed him the box carelessly.

"Come on to bed, mother. I'm dead tired. Good night, Tony."

V

THE next morning they heard him at the telephone, explaining to the alluring Alys that he would not be able to accompany her part of the way home, as they had arranged the evening before.

Mrs. Anthony felt as if her husband should have been in the diplomatic corps; and he himself wished that he were, when he had to break the news to her that Christopher's application for transfer to the aviation section of the Signal Corps had been granted.

"Milly dear," he went at it abruptly, "the boy has his orders and will leave to-day. He got his transfer, mother. You know how his heart is set on flying, and he's so pleased that we mustn't send him off weighted down with our anxieties. He has to go first to the ground school, as I think he called it."

Mrs. Anthony was silent for some time. Then she spoke solemnly:

"Maybe he'll be safer at that school than here, Henry. I've been reading that the percentage of men who get hurt is smaller than that of bachelors who marry before they go!"

Her husband beamed approbation.

"That's the way for a brave mother to feel—not to hold the youngster back. Besides, aviation isn't half so bad as it's painted. I see that Orville Wright has said that women make the best aviators, so it can't be so very dangerous."

Mrs. Anthony sank weakly into her chair.

"You mean women are going to fly? That they'll fly up into the air after my boy? I really believe that after all a trench is the only safe place for a young officer in war-time!"